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Table of Contents

CONDENSED INFORMATION FOR CONTRIBUTORS

i

AUTHOR INDEX

ix-xii

Commentary

*De novo* design of  $\beta$ -sheet proteins

Michael H. Hecht

8729-8730

Reviews

The development of mitochondrial medicine

Rolf Luft

8731-8738

Mitochondrial DNA sequence variation in human evolution and disease

Douglas C. Wallace

8739-8746

*Paper from a Colloquium*

Hepatitis viruses: Changing patterns of human disease (Correction)  
Robert H. Purcell

9195

Kinetic intermediates in the reactions between peptides and proteins of major histocompatibility complex class II

8842-8845

Craig Beeson and Harden M. McConnell

Convenient separation of high-purity  $C_{60}$  from crude fullerene extract by selective complexation with  $AlCl_3$   
Imre Bucci, Robert Aniszfeld, Tatyana Shamma, G. K. Surya Prakash, and George A. Olah

9019-9021

*Physical Sciences*

CHEMISTRY

Photolabile precursors of glutamate: Synthesis, photochemical properties, and activation of glutamate receptors on a microsecond time scale  
Raymond Wieboldt, Kyle R. Gee, Li Niu, Doraiswamy Ramesh, Barry K. Carpenter, and George P. Hess

8752-8756

*Biological Sciences*

BIOCHEMISTRY

Betadoublet: *De novo* design, synthesis, and characterization of a  $\beta$ -sandwich protein  
Thomas P. Quinn, Neil B. Tweedy, Robert W. Williams, Jane S. Richardson, and David C. Richardson

8747-8751

# Contents

CCAAT/enhancer binding protein $\alpha$ is sufficient to initiate the 3T3-L1 adipocyte differentiation program Fang-Tsyr Lin and M. Daniel Lane	8757-8761	Enhancer 1 binding factor (E1BF), a Ku-related protein, is a growth-regulated RNA polymerase I transcription factor: Association of a repressor activity with purified E1BF from serum-deprived cells Huifeng Niu and Samson T. Jacob	9101-9105
Regulation of scallop myosin by the regulatory light chain depends on a single glycine residue Agnes Jancso and Andrew G. Sz��nt-Gy��rgyi	8762-8766	The transcription factor TFIIIS zinc ribbon dipeptide Asp-Glu is critical for stimulation of elongation and RNA cleavage by RNA polymerase II ChoonJu Jeon, HoSup Yoon, and Kan Agarwal	9106-9110
RNA-dependent RNA polymerase from plants infected with turnip crinkle virus can transcribe (+)- and (-)-strands of virus-associated RNAs Chuanzheng Song and Anne E. Simon	8792-8796	The phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase $\alpha$ is required for DNA synthesis induced by some, but not all, growth factors Serge Roche, Manfred Koe��gl, and Sara A. Courtneidge	9185-9189
Identification of a human ubiquitin-conjugating enzyme that mediates the E6-AP-dependent ubiquitination of p53 Martin Scheffner, Jon M. Huibregtse, and Peter M. Howley	8797-8801	Polyamines regulate the expression of ornithine decarboxylase antizyme <i>in vitro</i> by inducing ribosomal frame-shifting (Correction) Eran Rom and Chaim Kahana	9195
Induction of structural changes in the bovine papillomavirus type 1 origin of replication by the viral E1 and E2 proteins Thomas G. Gillette, Monika Lusky, and James A. Borowiec	8846-8850	Assembly of synthetic cellulose I (Correction) Jong H. Lee, R. Malcolm Brown, Jr., Shigenori Kuga, Shin-ichiro Shoda, and Shiro Kobayashi	9195
The bovine papillomavirus E2 protein modulates the assembly of but is not stably maintained in a replication-competent multimeric E1-replication origin complex Monika Lusky, Jerard Hurwitz, and Yeon-Soo Seo	8895-8899	<b>BIOPHYSICS</b>	
Antizyme protects against abnormal accumulation and toxicity of polyamines in ornithine decarboxylase-overproducing cells Toshikazu Suzuki, Yong He, Keiko Kashiwagi, Yasuko Murakami, Shin-ichi Hayashi, and Kazuei Igarashi	8930-8934	The structure of a complex of hexameric insulin and 4'-hydroxyacetanilide G. David Smith and Ewa Ciszak	8851-8855
Constitutive activation of Mek1 by mutation of serine phosphorylation sites Weidong Huang and Raymond L. Erikson	8960-8963	Synergy in the spectral tuning of retinal pigments: Complete accounting of the opsin shift in bacteriorhodopsin Jingui Hu, Robert G. Griffin, and Judith Herzfeld	8880-8884
Specific sequences from the carboxyl terminus of human p53 gene product form anti-parallel tetramers in solution Hiroshi Sakamoto, Marc S. Lewis, Hiroaki Kodama, Ettore Appella, and Kazuyasu Sakaguchi	8974-8978	Femtosecond photodichroism studies of isolated photosystem II reaction centers Gary P. Wiederrecht, Michael Seibert, Govindjee, and Michael R. Wasielewski	8999-9003
Specific inhibition of herpes virus replication by receptor-mediated entry of an antiviral peptide linked to <i>Escherichia coli</i> enterotoxin B subunit Alessandro Marcello, Arianna Loregian, Anne Cross, Howard Marsden, Timothy R. Hirst, and Giorgio Pal��	8994-8998	Computation with chaos: A paradigm for cortical activity A. Babloyantz and C. Louren��o	9027-9031
An <i>in vitro</i> polysome display system for identifying ligands from very large peptide libraries Larry C. Mattheakis, Ramesh R. Bhatt, and William J. Dower	9022-9026	<b>CELL BIOLOGY</b>	
Involvement of the C-terminal residues of the 20,000-dalton light chain of myosin on the regulation of smooth muscle actomyosin Mitsuo Ikebe, Sheila Reardon, Yasuo Mitani, Hiroshi Kamisoyama, Motoi Matsuura, and Reiko Ikebe	9096-9100	P-selectin induces the expression of tissue factor on monocytes Alessandro Celi, Giuliana Pellegrini, Roberto Lorenzet, Antonio De Blasi, Neal Ready, Barbara C. Furie, and Bruce Furie	8767-8771
		Integrin $\alpha_v\beta_3$ rescues melanoma cells from apoptosis in three-dimensional dermal collagen Anthony M. P. Montgomery, Ralph A. Reisfeld, and David A. Cheresh	8856-8860
		Stringent sequence requirements for the formation of human telomeres John P. Hanish, Judith L. Yanowitz, and Titia de Lange	8861-8865
		Activated Ki-Ras complements erythropoietin signaling in CTLL-2 cells, inducing tyrosine phosphorylation of a 160-kDa protein Yasuko Yamamura, Makoto Noda, and Yoji Ikawa	8866-8870

# Contents

Subcellular localization of the UDP- <i>N</i> -acetyl-D-galactosamine: polypeptide <i>N</i> -acetylgalactosaminyltransferase-mediated O-glycosylation reaction in the submaxillary gland Jürgen Roth, Yang Wang, Allen E. Eckhardt, and Robert L. Hill	8935-8939	Evidence for multiple positive peaks from populations of bacteria evolving in a structured habitat Ryszard Korona, Cindy H. Nakatsu, Larry J. Forney, and Richard E. Lenski	9037-9041
<b>GENETICS</b>			
Relief of p53-mediated transcriptional repression by the adenovirus E1B 19-kDa protein or the cellular Bcl-2 protein Yueqiao Shen and Thomas Shenk	8940-8944	Development of cancer cachexia-like syndrome and adrenal tumors in inhibin-deficient mice M. M. Matzuk, M. J. Finegold, J. P. Mather, L. Krummen, H. Lu, and A. Bradley	8817-8821
Direct observation of substance P-induced internalization of neurokinin 1 (NK <sub>1</sub> ) receptors at sites of inflammation Jeffrey J. Bowden, Adella M. Garland, Peter Baluk, Peter Lefevre, Eileen F. Grady, Steven R. Vigna, Nigel W. Bunnett, and Donald M. McDonald	8964-8968	A mismatch recognition defect in colon carcinoma confers DNA microsatellite instability and a mutator phenotype Gabriele Aquilina, Patricia Hess, Pauline Branch, Catriona MacGeoch, Ida Casciano, Peter Karran, and Margherita Bignami	8905-8909
Long-term culture and functional characterization of follicular cells from adult normal human thyroids Francesco Curcio, Francesco Saverio Ambesi-Impiomato, Giuseppina Perrella, and Hayden G. Coon	9004-9008	A targeted chain-termination mutation in the mouse <i>Apc</i> gene results in multiple intestinal tumors Riccardo Fodde, Winfried Edelmann, Kan Yang, Claus van Leeuwen, Christine Carlson, Beatrice Renault, Cor Breukel, Elaine Alt, Martin Lipkin, P. Meera Khan, and Raju Kucherlapati	8969-8973
Two yeast genes with similarity to TCP-1 are required for microtubule and actin function <i>in vivo</i> Xiaoyue Chen, Donald S. Sullivan, and Tim C. Huffaker	9111-9115	Early myeloid cell-specific expression of the human cathepsin G gene in transgenic mice Jay L. Grisolano, Gary M. Sclar, and Timothy J. Ley	8989-8993
A yeast TCP-1-like protein is required for actin function <i>in vivo</i> Dani Bich-Nga Vinh and David G. Drubin	9116-9120	A transposable element can drive the concerted evolution of tandemly repetitious DNA Dianne Thompson-Stewart, Gary H. Karpen, and Allan C. Spradling	9042-9046
Identification of soluble forms of the fibroblast growth factor receptor in blood Anne Hanneken, Wenbin Ying, Nicholas Ling, and Andrew Baird	9170-9174	DNA polymerase $\delta$ is required for base excision repair of DNA methylation damage in <i>Saccharomyces cerevisiae</i> A. Blank, Baek Kim, and Lawrence A. Loeb	9047-9051
Mapping of the C5a receptor signal transduction network in human neutrophils Anne Mette Buhl, Natalie Avdi, G. Scott Worthen, and Gary L. Johnson	9190-9194	Genetic variation detected by quantitative analysis of end-labeled genomic DNA fragments Jun-ichi Asakawa, Rork Kuick, James V. Neel, Miekko Kodaira, Chiyoko Satoh, and Samir M. Hanash	9052-9056
<b>DEVELOPMENTAL BIOLOGY</b>			
The cellular retinoic acid binding protein I is dispensable Philippe Gorry, Thomas Lufkin, Andrée Dierich, Cécile Rochette-Egly, Didier Décimo, Pascal Dollé, Manuel Mark, Béatrice Durand, and Pierre Chambon	9032-9036	Serial transmission in rodents of neurodegeneration from transgenic mice expressing mutant prion protein Karen K. Hsiao, Darlene Groth, Michael Scott, Shu-Lian Yang, Hana Serban, Dennis Rapp, Dallas Foster, Marilyn Torchia, Stephen J. DeArmond, and Stanley B. Prusiner	9126-9130
<b>ECOLOGY</b>			
Eastern Pacific molluscan provinces and latitudinal diversity gradient: No evidence for "Rapoport's rule" Kaustuv Roy, David Jablonski, and James W. Valentine	8871-8874	<b>IMMUNOLOGY</b>	
<b>EVOLUTION</b>		Monoclonal antibody-superantigen fusion proteins: Tumor-specific agents for T-cell-based tumor therapy Mikael Dohlsten, Lars Abrahmsén, Per Björk, Peter A. Lando, Gunnar Hedlund, Göran Forsberg, Thomas Brodin, Nick R. J. Gascoigne, Cecilia Förberg, Peter Lind, and Terje Kalland	8945-8949
Gene trees and hominoid phylogeny Maryellen Ruvolo, Deborah Pan, Sarah Zehr, Tony Goldberg, Todd R. Disotell, and Miranda von Dornum	8900-8904	Binding of soluble natural ligands to a soluble human T-cell receptor fragment produced in <i>Escherichia coli</i> Katherine L. Hilyard, Hugh Reyburn, Shan Chung, John I. Bell, and Jack L. Strominger	9057-9061

# Contents

Genomic organization and structure of Bruton agammaglobulinemia tyrosine kinase: Localization of mutations associated with varied clinical presentations and course in X chromosome-linked agammaglobulinemia Yuko Ohta, Robert N. Haire, Ronda T. Litman, Shu Man Fu, Robert P. Nelson, Jamie Kratz, Stephen J. Kornfeld, Maite de la Morena, Robert A. Good, and Gary W. Litman	9062-9066	A murine model for B-lymphocyte somatic cell gene therapy Natalie Sutkowski, Ming-Ling Kuo, Alfredo Varela-Echavarría, Joseph P. Dougherty, and Yacov Ron	8875-8879
BY55 monoclonal antibody delineates within human cord blood and bone marrow lymphocytes distinct cell subsets mediating cytotoxic activity A. Bensussan, E. Gluckman, S. El Marsafy, V. Schiavon, I.-G. Mansur, J. Dausset, L. Boumsell, and E. Carosella	9136-9140	<i>BCL2</i> translocation frequency rises with age in humans Yafei Liu, Antonio M. Hernandez, Darryl Shibata, and Gino A. Cortopassi	8910-8914
Human T-cell-mediated destruction of allogeneic dermal microvessels in a severe combined immunodeficient mouse Allan G. Murray, Peter Petzelbauer, Christopher C. W. Hughes, José Costa, Philip Askenase, and Jordan S. Pober	9146-9150	Adeno-associated virus vectors preferentially transduce cells in S phase David W. Russell, A. Dusty Miller, and Ian E. Alexander	8915-8919
The pleckstrin homology domain of Bruton tyrosine kinase interacts with protein kinase C Libo Yao, Yuko Kawakami, and Toshiaki Kawakami	9175-9179	Transcriptional regulation of basic fibroblast growth factor gene by p53 in human glioblastoma and hepatocellular carcinoma cells Tetsuya Ueba, Tetsuya Nosaka, Jun A. Takahashi, Futoshi Shibata, Robert Z. Florkiewicz, Bert Vogelstein, Yoshifumi Oda, Haruhiko Kikuchi, and Masakazu Hatanaka	9009-9013
The $\alpha 3$ chain of type IV collagen induces autoimmune Goodpasture syndrome (Correction) Raghuram Kalluri, Vincent H. Gattone II, Milton E. Noelken, and Billy G. Hudson	9195	A lag in intracellular degradation of mutant $\alpha_1$ -antitrypsin correlates with the liver disease phenotype in homozygous PiZZ $\alpha_1$ -antitrypsin deficiency Ying Wu, Ina Whitman, Ernesto Molmenti, Kenneth Moore, Paul Hippenmeyer, and David H. Perlmutter	9014-9018
		Direct isolation of genes encoded within a homogeneously staining region by chromosome microdissection Yan A. Su, Jeffrey M. Trent, Xin-Yan Guan, and Paul S. Meltzer	9121-9125
<b>MEDICAL SCIENCES</b>			
Genetic changes in the transforming growth factor $\beta$ (TGF- $\beta$ ) type II receptor gene in human gastric cancer cells: Correlation with sensitivity to growth inhibition by TGF- $\beta$ Keunchil Park, Seong-Jin Kim, Yung-Jue Bang, Jae-Gahb Park, Noe Kyeong Kim, Anita B. Roberts, and Michael B. Sporn	8772-8776	Gastric carcinoma: Monoclonal epithelial malignant cells expressing Epstein-Barr virus latent infection protein Shosuke Imai, Shigeki Koizumi, Makoto Sugiura, Masayoshi Tokunaga, Yoshiko Uemura, Noriko Yamamoto, Sadao Tanaka, Eiichi Sato, and Toyoro Osato	9131-9135
An efficient and flexible system for construction of adenovirus vectors with insertions or deletions in early regions 1 and 3 Andrew J. Bett, Wael Haddara, Ludvik Prevec, and Frank L. Graham	8802-8806	Protein farnesyltransferase inhibitors block the growth of <i>ras</i> -dependent tumors in nude mice Nancy E. Kohl, Francine R. Wilson, Scott D. Mosser, Elizabeth Giuliani, S. Jane deSolms, Michael W. Conner, Neville J. Anthony, Wilbur J. Holtz, Robert P. Gomez, Ta-Jyh Lee, Robert L. Smith, Samuel L. Graham, George D. Hartman, Jackson B. Gibbs, and Allen Oliff	9141-9145
Receptor for advanced glycation end products (AGEs) has a central role in vessel wall interactions and gene activation in response to circulating AGE proteins Ann Marie Schmidt, Mirela Hasu, Doina Popov, Jing Hua Zhang, Jingxian Chen, Shi Du Yan, Jerold Brett, Rong Cao, Keisuke Kuwabara, Gabriela Costache, Nicolae Simionescu, Maya Simionescu, and David Stern	8807-8811	Transgenic mice overexpressing phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase develop non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus Alfons Valera, Anna Pujol, Mireia Pelegrin, and Fatima Bosch	9151-9154
The human multidrug resistance-associated protein MRP is a plasma membrane drug-efflux pump G. J. R. Zaman, M. J. Flens, M. R. van Leusden, M. de Haas, H. S. Mulder, J. Lankelma, H. M. Pinedo, R. J. Scheper, F. Baas, H. J. Broxterman, and P. Borst	8822-8826	Evidence that the vectorial competence of phlebotomine sand flies for different species of <i>Leishmania</i> is controlled by structural polymorphisms in the surface lipophosphoglycan Paulo F. P. Pimenta, Elvira M. B. Saraiva, Edgar Rowton, Govind B. Modi, Levi A. Garraway, Stephen M. Beverley, Salvatore J. Turco, and David L. Sacks	9155-9159

# Contents

## MICROBIOLOGY

- Interaction between the aphid transmission factor and virus particles is a part of the molecular mechanism of cauliflower mosaic virus aphid transmission 8885-8889  
Isabelle Schmidt, Stéphane Blanc, Pascal Esperandieu, Georges Kuhl, Gérard Devauchelle, Claude Louis, and Martine Cerutti

- Expression of tobacco mosaic virus coat protein and assembly of pseudovirus particles in *Escherichia coli* 9067-9071  
Duk-Ju Hwang, Ian M. Roberts, and T. Michael A. Wilson

## NEUROBIOLOGY

- Distribution of corticotropin-releasing factor receptor mRNA expression in the rat brain and pituitary 8777-8781  
E. Potter, S. Sutton, C. Donaldson, R. Chen, M. Perrin, K. Lewis, P. E. Sawchenko, and W. Vale

- Murine oligodendroglial cells express nerve growth factor 8812-8816  
Sujatha Byravan, Lyndon M. Foster, Tommy Phan, A. Neil Verity, and Anthony T. Campagnoni

- Heteromeric olfactory cyclic nucleotide-gated channels: A subunit that confers increased sensitivity to cAMP 8890-8894  
Jonathan Bradley, Jun Li, Norman Davidson, Henry A. Lester, and Kai Zinn

- Brain-derived neurotrophic factor increases the electrical activity of pars compacta dopamine neurons *in vivo* 8920-8924  
Roh-Yu Shen, C. Anthony Altar, and Louis A. Chiodo

- Cyanotriphenylborate: Subtype-specific blocker of glycine receptor chloride channels 8950-8954  
Nils Rundström, Volker Schmieden, Heinrich Betz, Joachim Bormann, and Dieter Langosch

- Treproenkephalin promoter yields region-specific and long-term expression in adult brain after direct *in vivo* gene transfer via a defective herpes simplex viral vector 8979-8983  
Michael G. Kaplitt, Ann D. Kwong, Steven P. Kleopoulos, Charles V. Mobbs, Samuel D. Rabkin, and Donald W. Pfaff

- Transgenic engineering of neuromuscular junctions in *Xenopus laevis* embryos transiently overexpressing key cholinergic proteins 9072-9076  
Michael Shapira, Shlomo Seidman, Meira Sternfeld, Rina Timberg, Daniela Kaufer, James Patrick, and Hermona Soreq

- Intravenous administration of a transferrin receptor antibody-nerve growth factor conjugate prevents the degeneration of cholinergic striatal neurons in a model of Huntington disease 9077-9080  
Jeffrey H. Kordower, Vinod Charles, Robert Bayer, Raymond T. Bartus, Scott Putney, Lee R. Walus, and Phillip M. Friden

- Microglia in invertebrate ganglia 9180-9184  
Dario Sonetti, Enzo Ottaviani, Francesca Bianchi, Madeline Rodriguez, Michelle L. Stefano, Berta Scharrer, and George B. Stefano

## PHARMACOLOGY

- Cellular signaling by an agonist-activated receptor/G $\alpha$  fusion protein 8827-8831  
Brigitte Bertin, Michael Freissmuth, Ralf Jockers, A. Donny Strosberg, and Stefano Marullo

- Genomic structure and analysis of promoter sequence of a mouse  $\mu$  opioid receptor gene 9081-9085  
Bon H. Min, Lance B. Augustin, Roderick F. Felsheim, James A. Fuchs, and Horace H. Loh

- Regulation of receptor internalization by the major histocompatibility complex class I molecule 9086-9090  
Lennart Olsson, Avram Goldstein, and Jan Stagsted

## PHYSIOLOGY

- On measuring the third dimension of cultured endothelial cells in shear flow 8782-8786  
S. Q. Liu, Morris Yen, and Y. C. Fung

- $\omega$ 3 polyunsaturated fatty acid modulates dihydropyridine effects on L-type Ca $^{2+}$  channels, cytosolic Ca $^{2+}$ , and contraction in adult rat cardiac myocytes 8832-8836  
Salvatore Pepe, Konstantin Bogdanov, Haifa Hallaq, Harold Spurgeon, Alexander Leaf, and Edward Lakatta

- Regulation of collecting duct water channel expression by vasopressin in Brattleboro rat 8984-8988  
Susan R. DiGiovanni, Søren Nielsen, Erik Ilse Christensen, and Mark A. Knepper

- Creatine kinase (CK) in skeletal muscle energy metabolism: A study of mouse mutants with graded reduction in muscle CK expression 9091-9095  
Jan van Deursen, Wim Ruitenbeek, Arend Heerschap, Paul Jap, Henk ter Laak, and Bé Wieringa

- Phosphatase inhibitors activate normal and defective CFTR chloride channels 9160-9164  
Frédéric Becq, Timothy J. Jensen, Xiu-Bao Chang, Anna Savoia, Johanna M. Rommens, Lap-Chee Tsui, Manuel Buchwald, John R. Riordan, and John W. Hanrahan

- Involvement of microtubules in the link between cell volume and pH of acidic cellular compartments in rat and human hepatocytes 9165-9169  
Gillian L. Busch, Rainer Schreiber, Peter C. Dartsch, Harald Völkl, Stephan vom Dahl, Dieter Häussinger, and Florian Lang

# Contents

## PLANT BIOLOGY

The recovery of photosynthesis from low-temperature photoinhibition is accelerated by the unsaturation of membrane lipids: A mechanism of chilling tolerance  
Zoltan Gombos, Hajime Wada, and Norio Murata 8787-8791

Cloning and characterization of a maize pollen-specific calcium-dependent calmodulin-independent protein kinase  
Juan J. Estruch, Sue Kadwell, Elijs Merlin, and Lyle Crossland 8837-8841

An ethylene-responsive enhancer element is involved in the senescence-related expression of the carnation glutathione-S-transferase (*GST1*) gene  
Hanan Itzhaki, Julie M. Maxson, and William R. Woodson 8925-8929

Isolation of phytoalexin-deficient mutants of *Arabidopsis thaliana* and characterization of their interactions with bacterial pathogens  
Jane Glazebrook and Frederick M. Ausubel 8955-8959

# Receptor for advanced glycation end products (AGEs) has a central role in vessel wall interactions and gene activation in response to circulating AGE proteins

(glycated protein/endothelium/receptor/diabetes mellitus)

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**ABSTRACT** The extended interaction of aldoses with proteins or lipids results in nonenzymatic glycation and oxidation, ultimately forming AGEs, the presence of which in the plasma and vessel wall is associated with diabetic vascular complications. We show here that AGE albumin in the intravascular space interacts with the vessel wall via binding to an integral membrane protein, receptor for AGE (RAGE), a member of the immunoglobulin superfamily, resulting in clearance from the plasma and induction of interleukin 6 mRNA. Intravenously infused <sup>125</sup>I-AGE albumin showed a rapid phase of plasma clearance with deposition in several organs. Rapid removal of <sup>125</sup>I-AGE albumin from the plasma was prevented by administration of a soluble, truncated form of RAGE, which blocked binding of <sup>125</sup>I-labeled AGE albumin to cultured endothelial cells and mononuclear phagocytes, as well as by pretreatment with anti-RAGE IgG. Ultrastructural studies with AGE albumin-colloidal gold conjugates perfused *in situ* showed that in murine coronary vasculature this probe was taken up by endothelial plasmalemmal vesicles followed by transport either to the abluminal surface or by accumulation in intracellular vesicular structures reminiscent of endosomes and lysosomes. Consequences of AGE-RAGE interaction included induction of interleukin 6 mRNA expression in mice. These data indicate that RAGE mediates the interaction of AGEs with the vessel wall, both for removal of these glycated proteins from the plasma and for changes in gene expression.

When proteins or lipids are exposed to aldoses, they undergo nonenzymatic glycation and oxidation (1-8), ultimately forming AGEs, whose formation occurs during normal aging and is accelerated in diabetics (1-7). The presence of AGEs in the plasma and vessel wall has been linked to the pathogenesis of diabetic complications, stimulating investigations to determine mechanisms through which AGEs exert their pathologic effects.

An important mechanism through which AGEs interact with cells is through specific receptors (9-13). We thus evaluated the role of the receptor for AGE (RAGE), which specifically binds AGEs (10-12), in mediating the interactions of these glycated molecules with target cells such as endothelial cells (ECs) and mononuclear phagocytes (MPs) (10, 11, 13). Previous studies have identified the presence of RAGE in bovine cardiac vasculature (13). We have now identified RAGE in murine coronary vasculature both *in vivo* and *in vitro* and employed this model to demonstrate that RAGE has a central role in uptake by the endothelium and in gene expression following AGE infusion.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Preparation of AGE Albumin, RAGE, and Anti-RAGE Antibody.** Mouse and bovine AGE albumin were prepared and characterized as described (2, 10, 11). Radiolabeling of AGE and native albumin was performed by the lactoperoxidase method (14); the tracers had specific radioactivities of  $\approx 1.5 \times 10^4$  cpm/ng (10, 11). For AGE albumin-gold conjugates, colloidal gold particles (5 nm in diameter) were prepared as described (15, 16). Bovine RAGE and monospecific rabbit anti-RAGE IgG were prepared and characterized as described (11). The  $\approx 35$ -kDa form of bovine RAGE was termed soluble RAGE (sRAGE; refs. 10 and 12).

**Cell Binding Assays.** Binding of <sup>125</sup>I-AGE albumin to cultured bovine adrenal capillary ECs or human MPs was studied as described (10, 11, 17).

**Infusion/Uptake Studies.** <sup>125</sup>I-labeled AGE albumin or <sup>125</sup>I-labeled native albumin ( $\approx 3$   $\mu$ g) was infused via the tail vein of CD<sub>1</sub> mice with or without preincubation with a 50-fold molar excess of sRAGE or preinfusion of the animals with either anti-RAGE IgG or nonimmune IgG. To assess tissue deposition, organs were removed and the weight and radioactivity (cpm) were measured (18). The method of Spady *et al.* (19) was used to calculate the tissue spaces. To correct for nonspecific tissue trapping of tracer, a tissue space for <sup>125</sup>I-albumin was calculated (18). All preparations of proteins utilized in infusion studies were tested in the *Limulus* amoebocyte assay (Sigma) for lipopolysaccharide content and, where indicated, were chromatographed on Detoxi-Gel columns (Pierce). Inactive heat-treated AGE albumin (boiled for 15 min) was also employed.

**Effect of AGE Albumin Infusion on Levels of Interleukin 6 (IL-6) Transcripts.** Three hours after AGE albumin infusion, mice were sacrificed, livers were excised, total RNA was extracted, and poly(A)<sup>+</sup> mRNA was prepared (20, 21). Random hexanucleotide-primed first-strand cDNA served as the template for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) analysis. Murine IL-6 primers and actin primers were obtained from Clontech. cDNA for murine IL-6 was amplified by PCR for 35 cycles, each consisting of incubations at 94°C for 2 min (first cycle) or 45 sec (remaining 34 cycles), 60°C for 45 sec, and 72°C for 2 min followed by 7 min at 72°C linked to 4°C. A similar protocol was utilized for the  $\beta$ -actin primers except that 25 cycles were employed. Products were separated by 2% agarose gel electrophoresis and transferred to nylon membrane for Southern hybridization with a <sup>32</sup>P-labeled oligonucleotide probe for murine IL-6 (Clontech).

Abbreviations: AGE, advanced glycation end product; RAGE, receptor for AGE; sRAGE, soluble RAGE; EC, endothelial cell; MP, mononuclear phagocyte; IL, interleukin.

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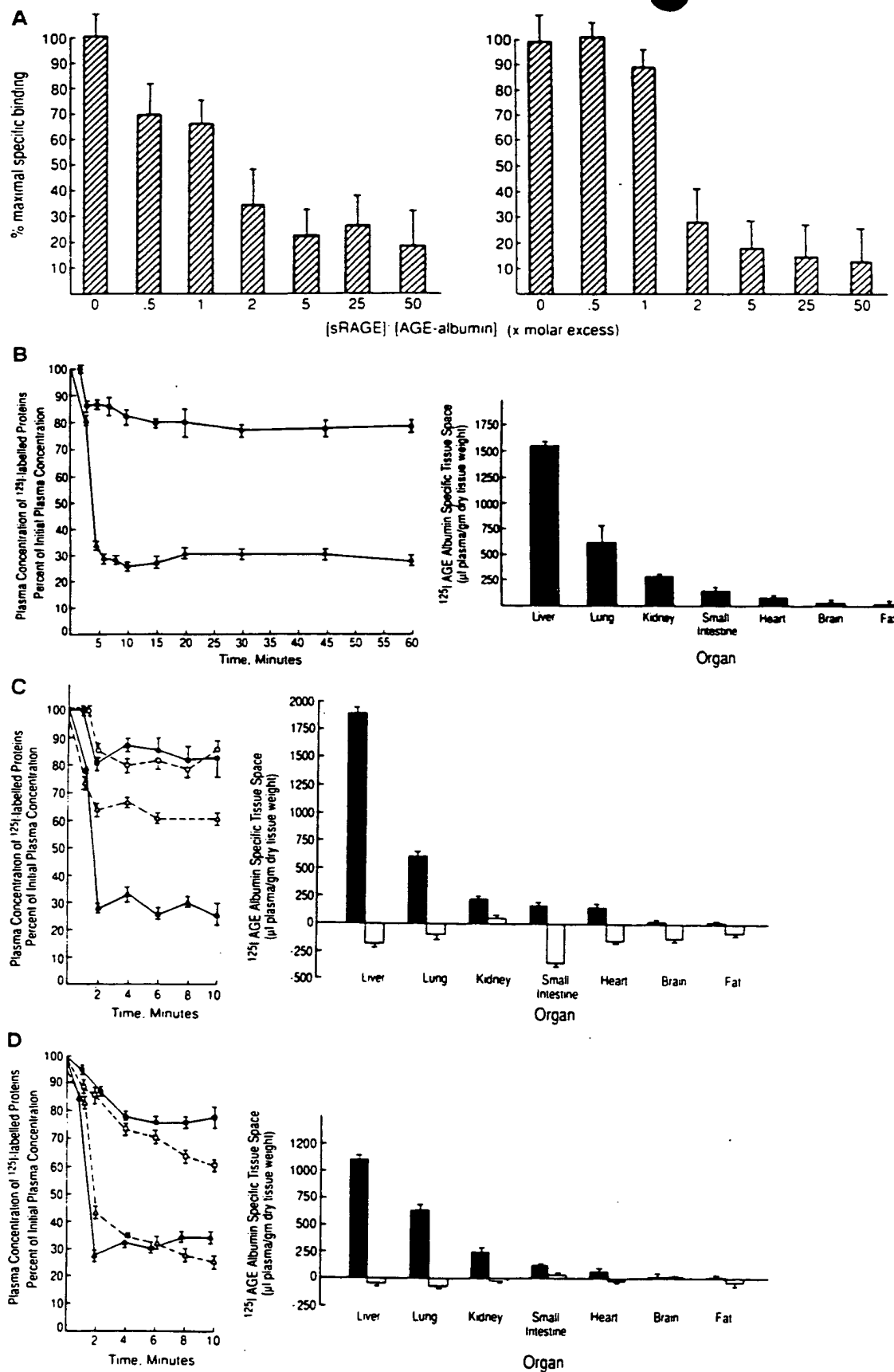


FIG. 1. (Legend appears at the bottom of the opposite page.)



**Ultrastructural Studies of Vessel Uptake of AGE Albumin.** Via laparotomy, a rat was catheterized, and the vasculature was washed free of blood with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) containing albumin (3.5 mg/ml) by using the vena cava as the outflow track. AGE albumin conjugated to colloidal gold was introduced at a flow rate of 3 ml/min at 37°C for 4 or 15 min. Unbound ligand was removed by perfusing PBS (3 min; 3 ml/min) and then 2.5% formaldehyde/1.5% glutaraldehyde/2.5 mM  $\text{CaCl}_2/0.1$  M sodium cacodylate-HCl buffer (pH 7.2). Thin sections of myocardium were cut on an OmU Reichert Ultramicrotome, stained with uranyl acetate and lead citrate, and examined with a Philips 400 HM electron microscope.

**Identification of Murine RAGE Antigen and mRNA in Cardiac Vasculature and Cultured Murine Coronary ECs.** RAGE was detected immunohistochemically on freshly harvested mouse cardiac tissue fixed overnight with 3.5% formalin in PBS and on confluent cultured murine coronary ECs (generously provided by R. Auerbach, University of Wisconsin, Madison) fixed in buffered 3.5% paraformaldehyde. After preparation, immunostaining with anti-RAGE IgG was performed as described (13). *In situ* hybridization was performed with digoxigenin-labeled RNA probes (13). Immunoblotting was performed with  $10^7$  cultured murine coronary ECs (10, 11, 13, 22).

## RESULTS

**RAGE Expression in Murine Cardiac Vasculature.** Immunohistochemistry demonstrated the presence of RAGE in murine coronary vessels, compared with absence of staining with nonimmune IgG, and *in situ* hybridization confirmed the presence of the mRNA with antisense probe, whereas sense controls were negative (data not shown). Experiments were also performed with cultured murine coronary ECs: RAGE was evident in nonpermeabilized samples, and *in situ* hybridization demonstrated RAGE mRNA (data not shown). Consistent with these results, Western blotting of detergent extracts of cultured murine coronary ECs demonstrated the presence of a single band at  $\approx 35$  kDa which was specifically immunoreactive with anti-RAGE IgG.

**Effect of sRAGE and Anti-RAGE IgG on the Binding of AGE Albumin to Cultured ECs and MPs and on the Removal of Infused AGE Albumin from the Blood.** To analyze the contribution of RAGE in the interaction of AGEs with cellular elements, we employed monospecific polyclonal anti-RAGE IgG which blocks the interaction of AGEs with cultured ECs and MPs (10, 11), and sRAGE. Addition of sRAGE to incubation mixtures of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -labeled AGE albumin with either ECs or MPs resulted in dose-dependent inhibition of binding (Fig. 1A). sRAGE did not affect binding of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -labeled factor IX to cultured ECs (data not shown).

To determine the effect of RAGE in the handling of circulating AGEs, infusion studies were performed with  $^{125}\text{I}$ -labeled AGE or native albumin in mice (Fig. 1B).  $^{125}\text{I}$ -labeled AGE albumin showed an initial rapid phase of removal from the blood, with  $\approx 70\%$  of the material gone by 5 min (Fig. 1B Left). The deposition of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin in the tissues, studied just after the rapid phase of AGE clearance from the blood, was enhanced relative to that of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -albumin, especially in the liver, lung, and kidney (Fig. 1B Right). When  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin was preincubated with sRAGE and infused into mice (Fig. 1C), the rapid phase of tracer clearance was largely blocked; sRAGE had no effect on  $^{125}\text{I}$ -albumin plasma levels (Fig. 1C Left). Animals pretreated with anti-RAGE IgG showed an even more complete blockade of the early clearance phase of infused  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin. The clearance of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -albumin was again unaffected (data not shown). Nonimmune IgG had no effect (Fig. 1D Left). Administration of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin with sRAGE or pretreatment with anti-RAGE IgG prior to  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin infusion strikingly decreased its deposition in the organs (Figs. 1C Right and D Right, respectively), suggesting that AGE albumin is initially cleared from the circulation and deposited in the organs/vasculature via a process which involves RAGE.

**Ultrastructural Studies of AGE Albumin with the Vessel Wall.** To assess vessel wall processing of infused AGEs, morphologic studies were performed with AGE albumin conjugated to colloidal gold particles, employing murine cardiac vasculature as a model system (23, 24). Four minutes after *in situ* perfusion, AGE albumin-gold conjugates decorated numerous plasmalemmal vesicles opened to the luminal front (Fig. 2A), while coated pits and coated vesicles were unlabeled (Fig. 2B). However, multivesicular bodies (Fig. 2B) and structures resembling endosomes appeared significantly decorated by the tracer (Fig. 2C and D). Gold particles were also seen in the proximity of the abluminal endothelial cell surface (Fig. 2D). Sparse gold particles were occasionally observed in the subendothelial space (Fig. 2A and D), suggesting that transcytosis had occurred. At 15 min, the presence of AGE albumin-gold particles in the subendothelial space was even more apparent. These experiments were performed in the presence of a large excess of native albumin (3.5 mg/ml) to block the interaction of determinants on albumin with vessel wall albumin-binding proteins (24–27). In addition, the presence of excess free AGE albumin blocked association of AGE albumin-gold particles with the heart tissue by  $>50\%$ , while anti-RAGE IgG prevented such association by 50–70%. Similar results were observed in studies using  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin (data not shown).

**Infusion of AGE Albumin Leads to Induction of IL-6 mRNA: Effect of Anti-RAGE IgG.** AGEs have been reported to modulate cell properties *in vitro*, including the induction of genes for cytokines and growth factors (28, 29). In view of the

**FIG. 1.** Intravascular perfusion of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin and  $^{125}\text{I}$ -albumin into mice: Effect of sRAGE and anti-RAGE IgG. (A) Effect of sRAGE on the binding of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin to cultured ECs (Left) and MPs (Right). (Left) Confluent bovine adrenal capillary ECs were incubated with  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin (100 nM) either alone (total binding), in the presence of a 30-fold excess of unlabeled AGE albumin (nonspecific binding), or with the indicated molar excess of sRAGE for 3 hr at 4°C. Percent maximal specific binding (total minus nonspecific binding), mean  $\pm$  SEM of triplicate determinations, is shown. Maximal specific binding was  $\approx 10$  fmol per well. (Right) Cultured human MPs ( $5 \times 10^4$  per well) were tested for their capacity to bind  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin (100 nM) as in A Left. Maximal binding with MPs was  $\approx 6$  fmol per well. (B Left) Removal of  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin and  $^{125}\text{I}$ -native albumin from the plasma. Mice were infused with tracer (3  $\mu\text{g}$  per animal), and blood was withdrawn for determination of radioactivity. The mean  $\pm$  SEM is shown, and experiments were repeated at least three times. (B Right) Deposition of infused  $^{125}\text{I}$ -labeled AGE albumin ( $\Delta$ ) or  $^{125}\text{I}$ -labeled native albumin ( $\bullet$ ). Mice were infused as in B Left and after 10 min radioactivity in the tissues was determined. Results in mice treated with  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin were compared with those in animals exposed to  $^{125}\text{I}$ -native albumin, and the mean  $\pm$  SEM is shown. (C) Effect of sRAGE on  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin clearance from the plasma (Left) and deposition in the tissues (Right). The same experiment as in B was performed, but both  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin ( $\Delta$ ,  $\bullet$ ) and  $^{125}\text{I}$ -albumin ( $\circ$ ,  $\bullet$ ) were preincubated for 60 min at 37°C with ( $\Delta$ ,  $\circ$ , open bars) or without ( $\bullet$ ,  $\bullet$ , filled bars) a 50-fold molar excess of sRAGE. (D) Effect of anti-( $\alpha$ )-RAGE IgG on  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin clearance from the plasma (Left) and deposition in the tissues (Right). The same experiment as in B was performed, but animals were pretreated for 30 min with either anti-RAGE IgG or nonimmune (NI) IgG (40  $\mu\text{g}$  per animal).  $\Delta$  and filled bars,  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin;  $\circ$  and open bars,  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE plus anti-RAGE IgG;  $\bullet$ ,  $^{125}\text{I}$ -AGE albumin plus nonimmune IgG;  $\bullet$ ,  $^{125}\text{I}$ -albumin. In all cases representative experiments are shown. Approximately 50 mice were employed for each experimental condition.

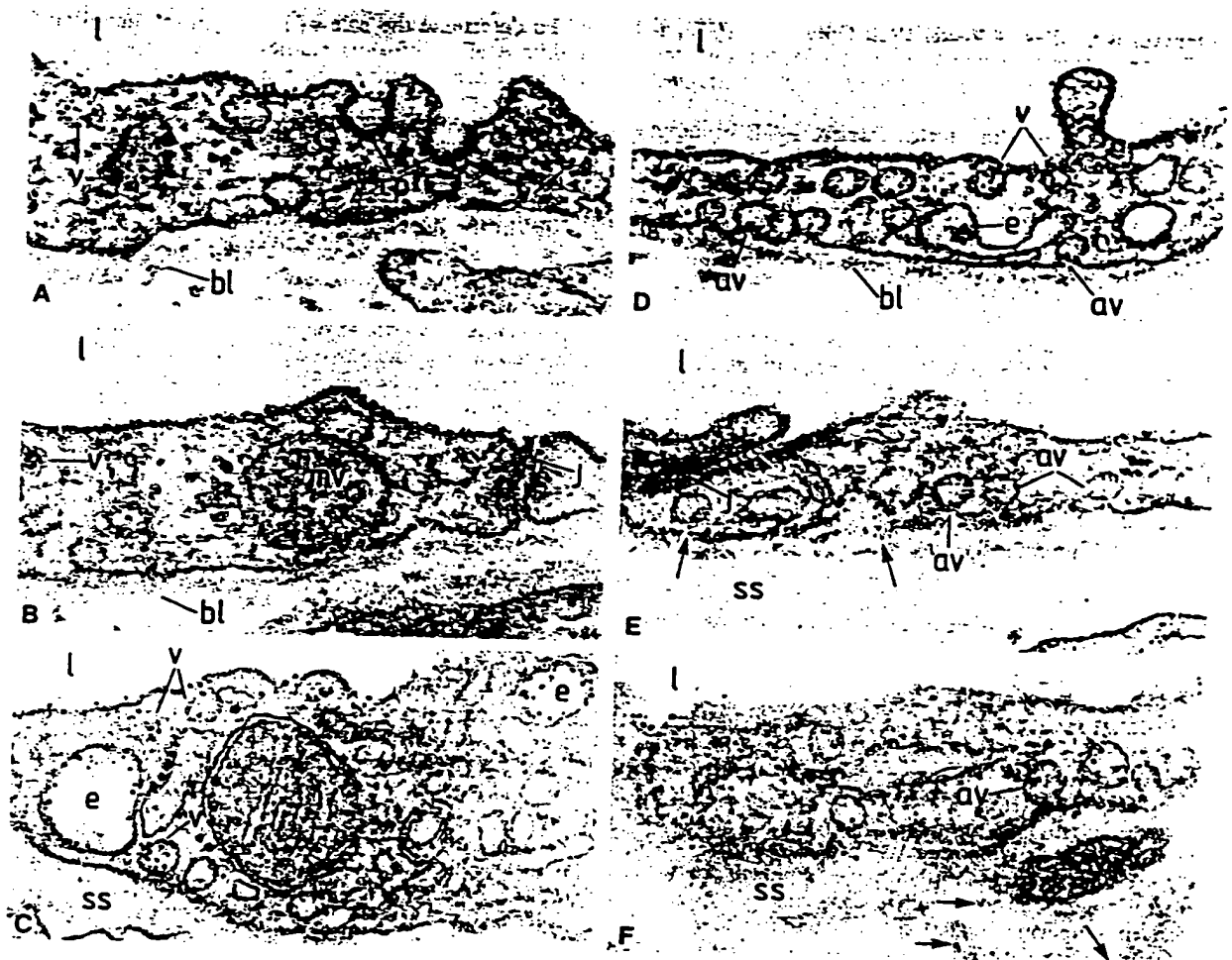


FIG. 2. Interaction of AGE albumin-gold conjugates with myocardial capillary endothelium at 4 min (A–C) and 15 min (D–F) after tracer perfusion *in situ*. (A) The particles are preferentially taken up by plasmalemmal vesicles (v), open to the luminal front, whereas coated pits (cp) are not labeled by the tracer. (B) The probe is endocytosed in a multivesicular body (mv). The intercellular junction (j) is not permeated by the tracer. (C) Large vesicles (e) (most likely of the endosomal compartment) are decorated. (D) At 15 min, several labeled plasmalemmal vesicles are present on the abluminal front (av). (E) In this segment, almost every vesicle associated with the abluminal front (av) appears as discharging its contents into the subendothelial space (arrow). At j, an intercellular junction containing tracer in its luminal infundibulum (arrowhead) is observed. (F) In some areas, the complex (arrow) has reached the subendothelial extracellular compartment. l, Lumen; ss, subendothelial space; bl, basal lamina. ( $\times 75,000$ .)

association of diabetes with increased levels of fibrinogen, an important risk factor for vascular complications (30–32), the ability of infused AGE albumin to elevate mRNA levels of IL-6, a cytokine linked to fibrinogen synthesis (33–35), was studied. Infusion of AGE albumin into normal mice led to an increase in IL-6 transcripts, compared with control animals infused with native albumin (Fig. 3A, lanes 3 and 2, respectively). The migration of the PCR band amplified from AGE albumin-treated mice was identical to that induced by exposure of animals to bacterial lipopolysaccharide, a known inducer of IL-6 (33) (Fig. 3A, lane 6). Southern blotting of these PCR products with an oligonucleotide probe for murine IL-6 confirmed the identity of the above amplicons (Fig. 3B, lanes 3 and 6, respectively). The increase in IL-6 transcripts in response to AGE albumin was blocked by pretreatment of mice with anti-RAGE IgG, whereas nonimmune IgG was without effect (Fig. 3A and B, lanes 4 and 5, respectively). Heat treatment of these preparations abrogated their ability to induce IL-6 (data not shown).

## DISCUSSION

Our data indicate that AGE albumin present in the intravascular space interacts with endothelial RAGE, resulting in its

removal from the plasma and subsequent endocytosis and transcytosis. Cell-bound AGEs can modulate cellular properties, as occurs after AGE-mediated activation of transcription factor NF- $\kappa$ B (36), generation of tumor necrosis factor and IL-1 (28), and induction of IL-6 mRNA (37). In addition, some of the AGE albumin is transferred across the endothelium by transcytosis, depositing ligand in the subendothelium where AGEs can potentially form crosslinks altering basement membrane structure and function (2), as well as interacting with other cells in the subendothelial space that bear RAGE. Subsequently, recruitment of intracellular second-messenger pathways and effector mechanisms in response to AGE engagement of RAGE could be initiated by signals in the cytosolic tail of the receptor or, in part, by the nature of the ligand itself, as AGEs have been shown to generate reactive oxygen intermediates (38–40).

Since AGEs, though a diverse class of structures, represent the final and irreversible consequence of glycation and oxidation of proteins and lipids (1–8), elucidation of a major cellular acceptor site, such as RAGE, could provide insights into the pathogenesis of disorders in which they accumulate. Although future studies employing reagents which prevent AGE–RAGE interaction over longer periods of time will be



FIG. 3. Infusion of AGE albumin induces IL-6 mRNA as shown by PCR analysis. Mice were infused with either saline alone (0), native albumin (250  $\mu$ g per animal) or AGE albumin (250  $\mu$ g/animal) alone, or AGE albumin in the presence of anti-RAGE IgG or nonimmune IgG (40  $\mu$ g per animal). Other animals received lipopolysaccharide (LPS, 100  $\mu$ g per animal, i.v.). *B* shows Southern hybridization of the products obtained in *A* with  $^{32}$ P-labeled oligonucleotide probe for murine IL-6. *C* shows PCR product obtained with  $\beta$ -actin-specific primers. Migration of DNA size (bp) markers (New England Biolabs) is shown at left.

required to dissect the possible contribution of RAGE to vascular dysfunction, the current experiments establish that AGEs in the intravascular space recognize RAGE on the vessel wall as a major cell-associated target.

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